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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, NOVEMBER 20

¶1. This is the second in a series of bi-weekly roundup cables on political developments in Almaty, Kazakhstan's "southern capital." The series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition following the Embassy's move to Astana. Items were drawn primarily from the local press and media.

Opposition Journalist on Trial

¶2. The Almaty procurator's office has launched a criminal case against opposition journalist Kazis Toguzbayev for insulting President Nazarbayev's dignity and honor. In July, the Almaty Committee for National Security (KNB) initiated a probe into two cases related to Toguzbayev's articles "Mafia Regime Covers up Murderers of Altynbek Sarsenbayev" and "Pope of Rome and Pope of Astana - Feel the Difference!" published on the www.kub.kz website on May 3, 2006 and April 2, 2006 respectively. The probe found that in both cases, Toguzbayev had insulted President Nazarbayev's dignity and honor in the mass media, which may lead to up to three years imprisonment (Criminal Code, article 318, part 2). The two cases were combined and passed to the city procurator's office. The trial began on November 20.

¶3. Two NGOs, Adil Soz and the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, issued a statement in support Toguzbayev. Convicting someone who criticizes a political figure would prevent journalists from participating in public disputes on urgent problems of society, the statement stressed. Adil Soz and the Bureau called on the authorities to stop the prosecution of the journalist and to withdraw the provisions on insulting the president's dignity and honor from the Criminal Code. (kub.kz, October 30)

Round Table Discussion of Public Television

¶4. On October 31 in Almaty, journalists and representatives of political parties and NGOs organized a second round table to present their concept of public television. According to the concept, public television will broadcast news, cultural, educational and entertainment programs contributing to the integrity of society and urging people to be involved in social, political and cultural activities. The group's concept statement reads "Public television and state television are identical terms. The state should own only one television channel and one radio station. Other state television channels should be privatized."

¶5. Many participants criticized the proposal that there be a single state television channel. Different opinions were expressed regarding the financing of public television and the membership of

the proposed supervisory body. Opposition leaders Bulat Abilov and Asylbek Kozhakhetov rejected the idea of state financing for public television because it would make public television dependent on the government. They also objected to state officials and members of parliament being members of the future public television supervisory board. Ganiy Kasymov of the Party of Patriots insisted on state financing and on two seats in the supervisory body for representatives of the Mazhilis and Senate.

¶ 6. Despite the many areas of disagreement, the participants decided to convey their proposal to Parliament the following week. Two Mazhilis members, Dariya Klebanova and Tokhttar Aubakirov, agreed to participate in the public television working group. It is hoped that Mazhilis deputies will initiate a draft law on public television based on the concept. Kasymov predicted that if the government supports the draft, Parliament could consider it as early as mid-2007.

Discussion of the "Infantilism" of Kazakhstani Society

¶ 7. On November 1, about a dozen activists from several youth organizations discussed the "Infantilism of Kazakhstani Society" at the Polyton Discussion Club in Almaty. The speakers underscored what they called the "infantile" behavior of Kazakhstani society, which they said is not used to making its own decisions and being responsible for its own deeds. Several speakers expressed hope that in the future, mature small and medium size businesses will facilitate building strong civil society. Representatives of NDI and Counterpart Consortium offices in Almaty attended the meeting.

Youth Movement in Defense of Labor Rights

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¶ 8. The "Bolashak" youth movement intends to set up a committee in defense of Kazakhstani labor, Kazakhstan Today news agency reported on October 31, citing the chairman of the movement Farkhad Kasenov. The same day at a press conference in Almaty, Kasenov said the new committee would review legislation on labor rights and examine how foreign enterprises observe social and labor norms. Kasenov believes "the conflict between Kazakhstan and Turkish workers at the Tengiz oilfield was the logical result of the accumulated animosity and unfairness at enterprises owned by foreign businesses." The committee plans to appeal to Parliament and Prime Minister Akhmetov to resolve the problems. In addition, they plan to organize inspections of foreign enterprises to attract public attention to what they claim are existing problems.

The Future of the Party System?

¶ 9. "In the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that Kazakhstan will have a two-party system based on two political parties competing for power," acting chairman of the pro-presidential Otan party B. Zhumagulov said in a November 3 interview with Liter newspaper. "It is more likely that Kazakhstan will have a one and a half party system, with one party which will dominate Parliament and form the government. Other parties will be on periphery of the political field. Their goal will not include the fight for power, but preventing the ruling party from stagnation."

People's Communist Party Defends Abilov

¶ 10. On October 31, the People's Communist Party of Kazakhstan issued a statement in support of opposition leader Bulat Abilov. The statement alleged that True Ak Zhol co-chairman Abilov was being prosecuted because of his active political stand. The communists demanded that the authorities stop the prosecution. (zonakz.net, November 7)

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